

THEM NASTY CRUEL RAILROADS: CHANGING LITERARY ATTITUDES TO RAILWAYS

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The uneducated maid Jenny in Mrs. Gaskell's *Cranford* reports "with a white face of terror" that "Captain Brown is killed by them nasty cruel railroads."¹ Were she capable of recognizing the death of the universally popular Captain as the price of progress she, and the other women of Cranford, would undoubtedly count that price too high. The malevolence of industrialization is a common theme in nineteenth century British literature, a preoccupation shared by many American writers of the time.

Among all the great engines and devices forged by the industrial revolution there is no more potent symbol than the railway. The phallic locomotive represents man's barely controlled, brutal domination of nature, time and space; the land is restrained and tamed under a network of iron rails which have been cut, gouged and torn into the earth while the ordinary people become the captives and servants of the new iron lord; they build it, they live with it, they service it and they travel on it. It is hardly surprising, then, that railways figure so prominently in the literature of the industrial age.

The railways were not only one of the greatest products of industrialization, but one of the greatest contributors to it too. Railways delivered raw materials, took away manufactured goods and carried people across continents, but the building and maintenance of the railways was an industry in itself. At the beginning of the nineteenth century Trevithick, Stephenson and others had developed working mobile steam engines capable of transporting great weights (in 1804 an engine built by Trevithick carried 25 tons of iron at five miles an hour for nine miles), unfortunately it was not until 1820 that a reliable wrought iron rail was invented by John Birkinshaw allowing the railway age to begin. By 1848, 5000 miles of railways were operating in the United Kingdom. To achieve this, output of iron had increased from 250,000 tons a year in 1815 to 2 million tons in 1848 and output of coal had increased from 16 million tons in 1815 to 50 million in 1848. Feverish railway construction was underway in the United States as well: "In 1830, 73 miles had been laid, in 1840, 3,328 miles, in 1850, 8,879 miles, and in 1860, 30,636 miles."² Iron and steel mills, coal mines and factories flourished, drawing in factory workers, miners and navvies to provide the labour for this pharaonic undertaking. Few can have remained unaffected by the ubiquitous railways; one notable victim of progress was the cowboy, no longer needed to drive cattle for weeks across hundreds of miles of territory when there was a railhead nearby. The railways also facilitated immigration in the United States: from the Ferry Depot in New York

1.- Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford*, Richard Edward King (London), p.28

2.- Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, OUP (London, 1980), p.125

thousands of immigrants were transported across the continent in often appalling conditions. In 1879 the Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson travelled from New York to San Francisco on an emigrant train to see for himself what conditions were like. He described his experiences in *Across the Plains*:

Cold, wet, clamour, dead opposition to progress, such as one encounters in an evil dream, had utterly daunted the spirits. We had accepted this purgatory as a child accepts the conditions of the world.³

Stevenson's father was an engineer and railway surveyor for the North Eastern Railway Company in England, so it is likely that he was accustomed to travelling by rail, and disinclined to condemn it totally. Later on in *Across the Plains* he offers a more considered opinion:

It seems to me, I own, as if this railway were the one typical achievement of the age in which we live, as if it brought together into one plot all the ends of the world and all the degrees of social rank, and offered to some great writer the busiest, the most extended, and the most varied subject for an enduring literary work.⁴

Stevenson's ambivalence is typical of the period; reactions to industrialization in general and railways in particular are mixed, with triumphal exaltation at the march of progress on the one hand, and reactionary foreboding on the other. One of those in favour of progress was Ralph Waldo Emerson:

An unlooked-for consequence of the railroad, is the increased acquaintance it has given the American people with the boundless resources of their own soil. If this invention has reduced England to a third of its size, by bringing people so much nearer, in this country it has given a new celerity to **time**, or anticipated by fifty years the planting of tracts of land, the choice of water privileges, the working of mines, and other natural advantages. Railroad iron is a magician's rod, in its power to evoke the sleeping energies of land and water.

The railroad is but one arrow in our quiver, though it has great value as a sort of yard-stick, and surveyor's line. The bountiful continent is ours, state on state, and territory on territory, to the waves of the Pacific sea; "Our garden is the immeasurable earth,
The heaven's blue pillars are Medea's house."⁵

3.- Robert Louis Stevenson, *Across the Plains*, Chatto & Windus, (London, 1920), p. 3

4.- Stevenson, p.33

5.- Ralph Waldo Emerson, *English Traits, Representative Men & Other Essays (The Young American)*, J.M. Dent & Sons (London, 1923), pp.358-9

There is something ingenuous in Emerson's optimism; surely a garden is the last place to install dirty, noisy, smelly machinery. The heavens are unlikely to remain blue either, once the noxious effluent of the chimneys of progress begins to smudge them. Emerson seemed to see humanity's inventiveness as an attribute supplied by nature itself, and that this nature-given role was what gave meaning to life. He also has the pre-ecological confidence that nature is quite capable of looking after itself:

We anticipate a new era from the invention of a locomotive, or a balloon; the new engine brings with it the old checks.....nothing is gained: nature cannot be cheated: man's life is but seventy salads long, grow they swift or grow they slow. In these checks and impossibilities, however, we find our advantage, less than in the impulses.⁶

That great optimist and patriot of the United States and the human race, Walt Whitman, was also, inevitably, ecstatic about the railways:

I see over my own continent the Pacific railroad surmounting every barrier,
I see continual trains of cars winding along the Platte carrying freight and passengers,
I hear the locomotives rushing and roaring, and the shrill steam-whistle,
I hear the echoes reverberate through the grandest scenery in the world,⁷

Whitman continues with almost religious tones as he describes the beauties of rock, plant, mountain, valley, river, lake, forest, desert and meadow culminating triumphantly with:

Marking through these and after all, in duplicate slender lines,
Bridging the three or four thousand miles of land travel,
Tying the Eastern to the Western sea,
The road between Europe and Asia.⁸

What of the suffering of the Chinese, Black and Irish labour gangs who built this railroad? What of the Native Americans whose lands were violated and whose buffalo

6.- Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays 1st & 2nd Series (Nature)*, J.M. Dent & Sons (London, 1924), p.309

7.- Walt Whitman, *A Choice of Whitman's Verse (Passage to India III)*, Faber (London, 1985), p.161

8.- Whitman, p.161

were destroyed to feed the ravenous railbuilders? What of the fires that must have consumed thousands of square miles of forest and prairie? Despite his wartime experiences Whitman chooses to ignore this human misery, just as he often ignores all of the terrible consequences of industrialization preferring instead to hover angel-like above a pastoral-mechanical utopia, unable to see the horror through his smoke-misted eyes. Perhaps he was right; more people have lived in greater material comfort and security in the twentieth century than at any other period in history, and the railway was at the beginning of the process.

Rebecca Harding-Davis' *Life in the Iron-Mills* shows a side to industrialization comparable only to the worst kind of slavery. The iron-mill workers live in polluted squalor; they work, sleep, eat bad food and drink worse whisky until they die. They are slaves to the mill owners in all but name, shackled by the need to survive. The railways are lurking balefully in the background; the characters in the story work "in one of Kirby & John's mills for making railroad-iron". It is a place where they have no right to individuality, no outlet for their creativity and no hope for future improvement; the only solution Rebecca Harding-Davis is able to offer seems apocalyptic: «This terrible question is its own reply; that it is not the sentence of death we think it, but, from the extremity of its darkness, the most solemn prophecy which the world has known of the Hope to come.»⁹

Like American slaves, Rebecca Harding-Davis has taken St. John the Divine as her patron, seeing, she believes, the Revelation beginning to be fulfilled around her. There is no reason to believe that *Life in the Iron-Mills* is exaggerated; enough is known of conditions in the industrial nineteenth century from other sources to know that, for some sectors of society at least, railways, factories and steam engines combined to create a hell on Earth.

Just as there were dreamy optimists like Emerson and Whitman who glibly carolled the glory of rail with blinkered vision, there were those who reacted against the Age of Steam with equal energy and with equally suspect perception. Herman Melville wrote many stories mocking the warped values and dire consequences of industrialization. In stories like *The Belltower* we see what happens when pride and technology combine to destroy the creator; it is a part of a story-telling tradition which includes Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and can be traced back to Ancient Greece and the legend of Daedalus and Icarus. At least Melville was able to retain a sense of humour:

Great improvements of the age! What! to call the facilitation of death and murder an improvement! Who wants to travel so fast? My grandfather did not, and he was no fool. Hark! here comes that old dragon again - that gigantic gad-fly of a Moloch - snort! puff! scream! -here he comes straight-bent through these vernal woods, like the Asiatic cholera cantering on a camel. Stand aside! here he comes, the chartered murderer! the death monopoliser! judge, jury, and hangman all together, whose victims die always without benefit of clergy. For two hundred and fifty miles that

9.- Harding Davis, "Life in the Iron-Mills" *An Anthology of American Literature*, Norton (New York, 1979), p.906

iron fiend goes yelling through the land, crying "More! more! more!"
Would that fifty conspiring mountains would fall atop of him!¹⁰

This description of a train rushing across the great American countryside could not be more different from Whitman's or, thankfully, less earnest. There are clues in the passage, however, to the instinctive mistrust of railways felt by Melville, and even more keenly, by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Death, fiends, and Moloch are Miltonic images reminding us of fallen angels burrowing frenziedly into the bowels of the earth, tearing up the land and striving to overthrow God and match his creation.

As we have seen Robert Louis Stevenson saw railways as a "most varied subject for an enduring literary work". Perhaps Hawthorne's *The Celestial Railroad* is not quite the work he had in mind, nevertheless it has endured. In it Hawthorne uses the symbol of the railway as an allegory for the road to destruction. The inspiration for the tale is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Hawthorne's reaction to industrialization is religious and instinctive; it is the reaction of a sensitive but mechanically impractical mind to forces beyond its aesthetic understanding. Melville's attitude is similar, though he is spiritual and humane rather than religious and narrow. In *The Paradise of Bachelors II (The Tartarus of Maids)* the narrator expresses horror at the fate of the women who work in the paper-mill; "through consumptive pallors of this blank, raggy life, go these white girls to death."¹¹ Melville obviously has some concern for the lot of factory workers, though he cannot resist giving them a pure, virginal symbolism. Hawthorne does not concern himself with factory and mill workers, perhaps he considered that the hardship of their lives would be rewarded with the certainty of a place in heaven, just like the "two dusty foot travellers in the old pilgrim guise, with cockle shell and staff, their mystic rolls of parchment in their hands and their intolerable burdens on their backs"¹² who make their way to the Celestial City on foot.

Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, published in 1900, tells the tragic story of Caroline Meeber who leaves her native, provincial town and goes to seek employment in the great industrial city of Chicago. The railway is the means of transport, the symbolic agent, which cuts her off from her innocent, secure, provincial background and plunges her into the evils of city life. Once she has boarded the train, like the patrons of the Celestial Railroad, she has taken a journey into despair:

To be sure there was always the next station, where one might descend and return. There was the great city, bound more closely by these very trains which came up daily. Columbia City was not so very far away, even once she was in Chicago.¹³

10. - Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories (Cock-a doodle-do)*, Penguin (London, 1985) p.105

11. - Herman Melville, *Great Short Works of Herman Melville*, Harper & Row (New York, 1969), p.218

12. - Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Mosses from an Old Manse, (The Celestial Railroad)*, Walter Scott Ltd. (London), p.193

13.- Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, New American Library (New York, 1961), p.7

Not so very far away in miles perhaps, but a different world nevertheless, and with as little hope of getting off the train as the passengers of the Celestial Railroad have. *Sister Carrie* is the story of a girl leaving innocence and the countryside behind in exchange for the big city, decadence and tragedy, it is a reflection of the change undergone by much of society at this time, a change that was happening all over the industrialized world. It is clearly not, in Dreiser's eyes, a change for the better. Dreiser's view was not shared by everyone. Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, which appeared in 1919, observes small-town life in the American Mid-West through the youthful eyes of George Willard. Winesburg has its fair share of evil, decadence, shame and tragedy, so much so, that deliverance comes only by George leaving, by train of course, to seek a new life in the big city. The train is, once again the agent of transferral; the interface between old and new, hope and despair, innocence and corruption, progress and stagnation.

Anderson was one of the first, but certainly not the last to see the railways in a more positive light. In the twentieth century attitudes to rail travel have changed completely: nostalgia for rail travel, and steam trains in particular, has increased proportionately with its decline as an industrial force. Jumping freight trains was one of the favoured forms of locomotion of the Beat Generation; they travelled "in boxcars boxcars boxcars racketing toward lonesome farms in grandfather night."¹⁴ Jack Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* begins:

Hopping a freight out of Los Angeles at high noon one day in late September 1955 I got on a gondola and lay down with my duffel bag under my head and my knees crossed and contemplated the clouds as we rolled north to Santa Barbara.¹⁵

The railways are now artistically acceptable as well as being a possible solution to the chaos of the roads and the pollution of the cities brought on by a psychopathic twentieth century fascination for the internal combustion engine. Ironically, the railways are now reminders of a quieter, less frenetic age, an age of dining cars and tiny, neat sleeping compartments that sway the traveller through the night with wheels clacking soothingly and the whistle hooting melancholically. Amtrak, the national rail company of the United States is now confined almost entirely to freight transport. No-one crosses the States by rail anymore when air travel is faster and cheaper. Greyhound buses and private cars have taken the rest of Amtrak's custom which is reduced to providing long distance rail travel solely for train lovers, romantics and sightseers.

Fear of technology has not gone away. Nuclear power, weapons of mass-destruction, industrial pollution, overpopulation and much more have converted the old devil of the railways into a benign spirit in comparison. Much nineteenth century fear of railways was a gut reaction, based on the quasi-religious myths dreamed up through the ages by the likes of Dante and Milton. They were apocalyptic fears masquerading

14. - Allen Ginsberg, *Howl*, City Lights Books (San Francisco, 1985), p.12

15.- Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, Penguin (London, 1982), p.3

behind the perverse anticipation that the wicked would perish in eternal flames while the righteous would be exalted in the life to come. Twentieth century fears are more temporal: the present and future consequences of widescale industrialization are known and Walt Whitman would not like them. The railways no longer offer a threat but carried us a long way on our chosen path: unfortunately it looks as if Hawthorne's gloomy outlook was the right one after all.

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